Learning How to Read

Niklas Luhmann

Modern Society produces many very different kinds of texts, which require very different kinds of reading. In some sense, the reading of one kind of text spoils the reader for reading of other kinds of text. Since this has to do with mostly unconscious and habitual routines, such specializations are difficult to correct.

It is advisable to differentiate between poetic, narrative, and theoretical (*wissenschaftliche*) texts. In what follows I will talk mainly about theoretical texts, but their characteristic features are best explicated by clarifying first why and how they must be read differently from poems and novels.

The existence of an independent type of fictional texts is the result of a long historical process of habituation, which lasted from the seventeenth until the late eighteenth century. It was characterized by the difficulty of differentiating between real reality and fictional reality. (Novels first present themselves as letters or notes that have been found, in order to convince the reader of their authenticity.) In narrative texts, the unity of the text is the result of a tension; it results from ignorance of the future which the reader is constantly [made] aware of; but it is also the result of a backward movement since, as Jean Paul noted, the resolution of the tension depends on the fact that the

reader must be able to recur to parts of the text he has already read. The reader is confronted, as it were, with the paradox of knowing what he does not yet know. The story develops not only in the temporal dimension of its actions, it is also qua text structured by time insofar as it operates on the distinction "already read" versus "not yet read."

The reading of poems involves completely different demands. Poems do not in any way offer stories in the form of verses and therefore cannot be read line by line in linear fashion from beginning to end. With them, tonal elements, unusual word choices (especially when ordinary words are used), the recognition of antonyms and contrasts, and especially rhythm are guarantors of a deeper sense (*untersinnig*) of unity that constantly accompanies the obvious meanings. This kind of reading demands an observant short-term memory and multi-layered recursions, which can never be sure that what is meant is also said.

Theoretical texts have still different demands. I am thinking here of texts written in ordinary language, that is, not of texts written in the secret language of mathematical or logical calculus. Even scientists must write in sentences if they wish to publish. There is a wide variety of word-choices available. Most readers of theoretical texts cannot even imagine the large role of randomness in this process. Indeed, even most writers usually do not make this clear to themselves. The large majority of passages in a text could also have been formulated differently; and they would have been formulated differently if they had been written on another day. The large mass of not especially significant words (*Füllmasse*) necessary for formulating a sentence is not accessible to conceptual regulation. Take the

phrase “not accessible” in the previous sentence, for example. This problem cannot be avoided. It cannot be avoided even if we are very careful and pay a great deal of attention to the differentiation and recognizability of those words which have special conceptual importance. They will only form a very small part of the entire text (*Textmasse*). And how shall a reader find these words which are decisive?

This problem is especially prevalent in two cases, namely, in that of a translator and in that of a beginner. In any case, especially with these two classes of readers, I noticed how much my writing depends on incidental circumstances—even though I am very careful in maintaining and refining theoretical connections.

Translators not sufficiently acquainted with a given text’s theoretical context often employ equal effort with regard to all the words they find within a text. This does not mean that they will translate “word for word” and follow the word order because this is usually impossible. But they do not consider themselves justified in playing with the large mass of not especially significant words. They select among the many lexically similar equivalents which seem to approach the intended meaning most closely. And I do not know how this could be done differently without writing entirely different texts in the other language. Theoretically interested readers should therefore follow the advice of learning as many languages as possible in such a way that they have at least passive mastery of them and thus can read and understand them.

Beginners, especially beginning students, find that they are first confronted with a mass of words, which are ordered in sentence-form, which they read sentence by sentence, and which they can

understand as sentences. But what is important? What must be "learned?" What is important, what is mere adornment? After a few pages of reading, one can hardly remember what one has read. Which recommendations can be offered?

One possibility is to remember names: Marx, Freud, Giddens, Bourdieu, etc. Obviously most knowledge can also be ordered by names, eventually also by names of theories such as social phenomenology, theory of reception in the literary disciplines, etc. Even introductions to sociology and basic texts are conceived in this way. What one cannot learn from such works, however, are conceptual connections and especially the nature of the problems that these texts try to solve. Still, even candidates in exams at the end of their studies want to be examined on Max Weber or, if that is too much, on Humberto Maturana, and they are prepared to report on what they know about these authors.

The problem of reading theoretical texts seems to consist in the fact that they do not require just short-term memory but also long-term memory in order to be able to distinguish between what is essential and what is not essential and what is new from what is merely repeated. But one cannot remember everything. This would simply be learning by heart. In other words, one must read very selectively and must be able to extract extensively networked references. One must be able to understand recursions. But how can one learn these skills, if no instructions can be given; or perhaps only about things that are unusual like "recursion" in the previous sentences as opposed to "must"?

Perhaps the best method would be to take notes—not excerpts, but condensed reformulations of what has been read. The re-description of what has already been described leads almost

automatically to a training of paying attention to “frames,” or schemata of observation, or even to noticing conditions which lead the text to offer some descriptions but not others. What is not meant, what is excluded when something is asserted? If the text speaks of “human rights,” what is excluded by the author? Non-human rights? Human duties? Or is it comparing cultures or historical times that did not know human rights and could live very well without them?

This leads to another question: what are we to do with what we have written down? Certainly, at first we will produce mostly garbage. But we have been educated to expect something useful from our activities and soon lose confidence if nothing useful seems to result. We should therefore reflect on whether and how we arrange our notes so that they are available for later access. At least this should be a consoling illusion. This requires a computer or a card file with numbered index cards and an index. The constant accommodation of notes is then a further step in our working process. It costs time, but it is also an activity that goes beyond the mere monotony of reading and incidentally trains our memory.

This could be the occasion to remember that the differentiation of kinds of texts with which we started, originated only in the eighteenth century. This holds for the modern novel as well as for demanding (or as one might be tempted to say: multi-medial) poetry and theoretical publications. Obviously this differentiation has been influenced by book printing in all of its aspects. It could be that, especially given the possibilities that computers offer, we now must return to the achievements inherent in writing itself.

Niklas Luhmann (transl. Manfred Kuehn)

∴ Visit the Zettelkasten Method project page for more!

« Back to index